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ABSTRACT

The Houston Community College System has adapted off-campus freshman composition courses to meet the needs of non-traditional college students. The program offers both college option classes for high school seniors, and business, industrial or professional classes for older students. Although there are some problems inherent in both the college option and off-campus business programs, the courses are highly regarded by their constituents. Parents like the idea of their children having an inexpensive trial lap around college hurdles before they leave home; high school students, for the most part, would rather take college English than high school English; and businesses are happy to be able to provide on-site education for the professional growth of their employees. In addition, college administrators are pleased to have the college promoted and publicized, and instructors like the challenge of adapting objectives and pedagogical techniques to a variety of students. For the students themselves, these courses offer a refreshing change of pace, and a more convenient location and time. (PRA)

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CCCC presentation--1991
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WRITE WHERE YOU ARE: THE OFF-CAMPUS COMPOSITION COURSE

As Helon Howell Raines points out in a recent CCCC article, if "the text of teaching writing" is to be complete, we community college teachers need to share our experiences in teaching writing because of "the sheer number of students we teach, as well as our vast experience in the classroom" ("Is There a Writing Program in this College? Two Hundred and Thirty-Six Two-Year Schools Respond," May 1990, 159). Our institution, the Houston Community College System, an urban commuter college founded twenty years ago next August, is now the nation's fifth largest community college with 63,000 students on thirty-seven campuses. Seventy percent of our students are employed; sixty percent are female; the average age is 27. While "changing demographies . . . [present] us with students who have necessitated our finding new ways of completing . . . [our educational] mission ("Call for Program Proposals," CCCC 1990), so too does modern technology give us innovative means to reach these students.

We three HCC instructors share with you today some of the methods by which our college has adapted freshman composition to meet the needs of our non-traditional college population. We teach freshman composition courses academically equivalent to on-campus courses through interactive television and computer-modem instruction as well as by teaching off-campus on business and

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industrial sites and high school campuses in a "college option" system.

First, let me briefly describe the content of the two freshman writing courses, English 1301 and 1302, we discuss today. English 1301 is our first semester transfer-level composition course. Students are placed in this course based on a satisfactory assessment score or completion of a fundamentals of grammar and composicion course for native or foreign speakers with a grade of C or better, plus an acceptable diagnostic essay written during the first week of classes. English 1301 reviews sentence structure, usage, and punctuation while focusing on six rhetorical modes: narration and description, process, comparison and contrast, division and classification, definition, and cause and effect. Students write four major out-of-class essays and two in-class essays. They must make a C or better on in-class writing to make a C or better as a course grade. If they fail the in-class essays, they fail the course; if they make a D on in-class writing, their course grade is D, regardless of the average of their other grades.

English 1302, the second-semester course, emphasizes persuasive techniques, style, and research skills. Students are placed in the course based on a C or better grade in English 1301 and, once again, a satisfactory performance on a diagnostic essay written during the first week of class. For this course, they write two out-of-class essays, two in-class essays and one research paper. Just as in English 1301, their course grade depends on their performance on in-class writing. (I should also

mention that a liberal HCCS policy allows students to drop a class with a no-penalty grade of W as late as three weeks before final examinations.) Both courses emphasize a four-step writing process: creating, drafting, revising and editing.

You should probably also know that our full-time instructors teach five courses, ideally with no more than three preparations. Composition courses can have as many as forty students. We have no assistance in grading and almost no clerical help; many instructors have no offices. Some teach on as many as five different campuses.

The non-traditional students we serve at our open-door college almost universally express desires for better jobs, better career opportunities, and better material rewards for work accomplished. We try to help them reach these goals while also helping them gain the understanding and enjoyment of those aesthetic attributes which affect the value of life.

With this background on our college, its students, courses, and instructors, my specific topic this morning is off-campus composition courses which generally serve two purposes: college option and community need. College option courses, which we've taught for ten years, are offered to current high school seniors on their high school campuses before the beginning of their school day, during it, or most commonly, just following regular classes. Yet they are definitely not honors courses; admission requirements are a 400 on the SAT verbal or 15 on the ACT or passing our ASSET test. Students usually enroll to get an early

start in college or, as they occasionally candidly admit, "to get their least favorite subject out of the way" before college.

In contrast, other off-campus courses taught in such varied locales as medical centers, hospitals, drug rehabilitation centers, the police academy, factories, and corporations such as Exxon and Texas Instruments, respond to the needs of particular segments of the community. Students who take these courses tend to be more serious, motivated, and mature than on-campus students. Either they've found themselves stagnating at a certain job level unless they improve their skills, or they now have the time and financial means to take advantage of an educational opportunity.

The advantages to the students of both college option and off-campus courses are many: most obviously, convenient location and schedule. In addition, being in class with a peer group, whether scholastic or professional, provides a support network both in and out of the classroom. Attending a class held in a friendly and familiar environment may lessen writing anxiety. Advantages to the institution include publicizing the college program and increasing community involvement in higher education.

Similarities between the programs include monetary incentives--since both the high schools and the businesses offer their own instructional space, students do not have to pay building fees. In addition some of the corporations are quite generous with financial support for their students; for example, the Exxon course this semester is free, including books, for those students who finish the course with a grade of C or better.

Registration, often a time-consuming headache for on-campus students, is simplified for these students, who usually complete the process at their instructional location.

Although the reasons are different, the retention rate is quite high in both programs. The high school students would rather be in a college class meeting two or three times a week than a high school class meeting five times a week. Also their academic preparation is generally good; they usually have no problems with grammar or mechanics. In off-campus courses the high retention rate may be attributed to motivation; students who do drop usually do so immediately, as soon as they realize that job and/or family will not permit them the time and effort required for the class.

For the instructor, there are advantages to working with student groups with common interests and backgrounds. For example, my colleague Jeff Lindemann, who taught the medical center English 1302 last semester, used their collective involvement in medicine to pursue the topic "medical ethics" throughout the semester. The topic engaged them as others might not have, and their small medical library had available adequate resources for research in that field.

No high school is without current "hot" topics which students are usually more than ready to analyze in their essays; in Texas recently those topics have been "no pass, no play" legislation and mandatory state examinations in English, math and reading.

However, despite these advantages, there are also problems inherent in both our college option program and our off-campus business program. None of these programs offers office space for instructors to confer with students before or after class. Instructors must arrive early or stay late, use phone consultations, or allow more in-class time for lab sessions and individual conferences.

Students in these programs do not become involved with campus life; many never set foot on a regular campus. They may not mind this; very few of the high school students expect to attend HCCS except possibly in the summer. Business and industrial students already have full lives; to suggest that they add campus social, athletic, or political events to their crowded schedules usually are met with polite refusals. Instructors do have the responsibility to communicate those campus administrative details directly affecting the careers of these students such as registration and final dates for drop/adds. Beyond that they may find that the best way to provide access to campus life for those students who desire want it is simply to bring to class copies of the campus newspaper.

Other than these general problems which affect both types of off-campus courses, there are some problems inherent in the individual programs; I'd like to discuss those too, beginning with the college option classes.

Perhaps the biggest problem with college option courses is recruiting faculty to teach them. After all, if most of us had wanted to teach high school-age students, we'd be teaching in

high schools. College option students are often immature, unwilling as yet to accept the discipline and responsibilities of college. Teaching them on their own campuses, perhaps even in the same classrooms where they take high school subjects, makes it difficult for them to realize the different expectations of the college instructor. Academically they are competent; behaviorally, less so. Instructors of college option classes often must drop the democratic informality they cherish in their on-campus writing courses in order to preserve classroom decorum (and to prevent too many visits from the high school principal).

Most college option courses are taught during the spring semester, thus refreshing the instructor's knowledge of the term "senior slump." Students may receive SAT or ACT scores half-way through the semester permitting them to bypass the very freshman English course they are now taking. Yet if they drop the college class with two or three weekly meetings, they may have to attend a high school class with daily meetings. They don't want to drop, yet they have no incentive to do the course work. However, experienced instructors can usually handle this situation as soon as it arises with a brief but sincere conference.

Unlucky the instructors of college option classes whose school districts observe a different spring break than the college's. While their on-campus college classes have no meetings and more fortunate colleagues revel in the blissful week of relaxation, travel, or professional enrichment whose promise has gleamed through the dull dark days of February, these instructors find themselves trudging off to meet their high

school classes. (And there is almost no way around this dilemma. If high school students are supposed to be in class, they'd better be in class.)

If, as sometimes happens, high school students are taking high school English and college English simultaneously, instructors must be prepared to hear, "But that's not the way Mrs. Casey says to do it." And we must be prepared to accept that Mrs. Casey's opinion is probably going to outweigh ours; after all, it's her hometurf. I've found the easiest way around this obstacle is to remind my students about audience-directed writing: when one writes in Mrs. Casey's class, by all means write as she dictates. When writing for Mrs. Cole, let's try something different.

On the other hand, it's good for students to have the opportunity to test their high school lessons against the college experience. Stacy, who's always earned an A for mechanically perfect writing which doesn't say anything, is shocked to find her essays graded with low C's. On the other hand Bill, whose quirky creativity has never appealed to his high school teachers, who consequently "hates" English, finally may find an enthusiastic reader who gives him A's, who validates and empowers him as a writer.

Peer writing groups are both easier and more difficult with college option students--easier because they already know each other; more difficult because this familiarity makes them loath to say anything that may even appear to be critical. Again the instructor should face this obstacle immediately by pointing out

that analyzing each other's writing fairly and objectively is a service rather than a criticism.

A common problem with young writers is puerile, undeveloped essays on "safe" subjects. But faced with such writing, the creative instructor accepts the challenge of providing stimulating discussion material and provoking written responses beyond the shallow and typical.

In contrast to the college option program in the high schools, problems with business, industrial, and professional classes usually have more to do with the site than with under-motivated or ill-prepared students. Lack of adequate libraries makes teaching the research paper difficult. However, one can build on what is available--hospitals have medical libraries so topics in medicine can be researched; businesses provide excellent resources for on-site interviews. Students can apply research techniques to immediate problems in their workplaces, for example, compiling data on suppliers and writing evaluations; interviewing other nurses and recommending to a hospital board that nursing shifts be scheduled differently.

And counterbalancing any problem with this group is their motivation, their seriousness, their committment to self-improvement and enrichment, qualities which permit instructors to expand curriculum rather than delete, to cut off discussion rather than provoke it, to hear that most beautiful phrase of all: "I wish this class met longer." Since such occasions are often infrequent in our on-campus classes, teaching these students can be the tonic a jaded instructor needs.

So, in conclusion, how are off-campus composition courses at Houston Community College regarded by their constituents? The community favors them: parents like the idea of their children having an inexpensive trial lap around the college hurdles before they leave home; high school students, for the most part, would rather take college English than high school English; and businesses are happy to be able to provide on-site education for the professional growth of their employees. College administrators are pleased to have the college promoted and publicized in more venues. Instructors like the challenge of adapting objectives and pedagogical techniques to a variety of students; for them these courses offer a refreshing change of pace with, perhaps for them also, a more convenient location and time.

So there you have it--Houston Community College's experiences with off-campus composition. Write where you are is, for us, a reality rather than a dream, a reality in which we three are glad to participate.